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Biblical Counseling, Addictions, and the Body of Christ



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Dave Dunham

March 4, 2015

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Counseling people struggling with addictions is full of complexities and challenges. There are a host of problems that compound the counseling process: chemical, psychological, social, and of course spiritual. We can help our friends struggling with addictions immensely by involving the larger church body in their recovery.

Addiction and Research

Cases of addiction counseling are particularly complicated by the reality of chemical dependency. Substance abuse leads to all kinds of biological cravings that are hard to fight against. Yet, the power of chemical dependency can often be overstated. Dr. Carl Hart, researcher at Columbia University, found that chemical dependency was not as much a driving force in drug use as is often suggested. Through his studies he found that a drug user could often choose to forgo meth or crack if an alternative offer had a higher reward. Reporting in [The New York Times](#), John Tierney wrote

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about Hart's work stating:

“He...found that when he raised the alternative reward to \$20, every single addict, of meth and crack alike, chose the cash. They knew they wouldn't receive it until the experiment ended weeks later, but they were still willing to pass up an immediate high.”

Instead of focusing on chemical dependency, he speaks of the “rational choices of crack addicts.” Many scientists sympathize with Hart's work. Psychologist Craig Rush and drug expert David Nutt are both quoted in Tierney's NYT piece agreeing with his findings. Author Johann Hari recently undermined the dominance of chemical dependency in a piece for [The Huffington Post](#). His own personal, independent research also validated the claims of Dr. Hart.

In many cases what researchers have found is that addiction has a strong social component to it. Environmental and relational factors played a huge role in continued drug use. Tierney quotes Hart, saying:

“The key factor is the environment, whether you're talking about humans or rats,” Dr. Hart said. “The rats that keep pressing the lever for cocaine are the ones who are stressed out because they've been raised in solitary conditions and have no other options. But when you enrich their environment, and give them access to sweets and let them play with other rats, they stop pressing the lever.”

Organizations like AA and NA have for many years now seen the value and importance of socialization for recovery. The likelihood of change increases as engagement in healthy community increases. This has direct implications for biblical counselors.

Addictions and Biblical Counseling

I have spent the last five years working among men and women recovering from addictions of various kinds. In counseling these brothers and sisters, I walk through



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the same basic method of exposing heart idols, establishing practical barriers, and encouraging consistent accountability.

Often I see progress in a change of mind and heart. I see people willing to take responsibility for their sinful habits.

I also often see relapse, discouragement, and resignation. I have felt discouraged myself, as I think about my own inability to help people change and make progress.

Finding ways to include the larger church in an individual's recovery process has made the most significant impact. We can include the church in addiction counseling in several key ways, each with specific benefits to those in need of help. We'll use Bill's story as a guide to discussing these various elements of church-wide counseling for substance abuse problems.

Support Groups

Bill came to our recovery program because it was mandated. He could either attend recovery or face church discipline. It was the last place he thought he would ever find himself, still being convinced that he didn't have an addiction problem. Over time, however, support groups became a means to breaking through his spiritual blindness.

Our Thursday night support meeting allows individuals with specific sin and sorrow struggles to come to meet and find encouragement and reassurance in the midst of their own struggles. At our substance abuse table, Bill heard the confessions of other brothers who were struggling in the same way. These confessions did two key things for Bill: (1) It allowed him to see his own sin more clearly, and (2) It encouraged him that he was not alone.

Bill didn't want to acknowledge his sinful choices; he didn't want to believe that his life was a mess. The confessions of others began to sound vaguely familiar. As they

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[Samuel Austin](#)

What if my wife is always

admitted to sin, Bill could no longer pretend he wasn't doing the same things. Their confessions allowed him to come to terms with his own sin. It also reassured him that he wasn't the only one struggling. The admission of his sin was painful; the support of others who could sympathize reminded him of the Apostle Paul's words: no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man ([1 Corinthians 10:13](#)). He was not alone and would not have to fight these temptations alone.

Support allowed Bill to own his sin. In individual counseling, he had been regularly confronted with his sinful choices, rebuked, and urged to take responsibility. He remained recalcitrant to these pleas. Involving other brothers from the church in Bill's issues allowed him to hear these same pleas from a different angle. Our stories have the power to help one another. There is healing in confession, not simply for those who confess ([James 5:16](#)), but for those who hear that confession and are instructed by it. In this way Support Groups helped Bill in ways that individual counseling simply didn't.

Team Counseling

One of the other formats for biblical counseling we have developed in our church is team counseling. As Bill started to accept the breadth and depth of his problems and God's solution for those problems, he moved on from the weekly support group to more intensive discipleship.

He began attending a closed discipleship class with a handful of other people. A teacher would instruct this handful of people each week on basic components of doing a self-inventory by wrestling with past and present decisions and emotions. This teacher would instruct the group on biblical truths, promote healthy confession of sin, and oversee weekly accountability.

But Bill wouldn't just get a weekly class with some intensive homework and a good teacher. He would also get a personal mentor who would walk alongside him through the process. He would meet with this mentor outside of class each week, be held accountable to all his homework and to his life habits, and he would have someone who could stand with him when he made confessions to those whom he had hurt.

saying things like mmm look at that? Am I responsible for her actions? I am a blood bought child of God but she is not and it seems as if she wants to be. I have witnessed...

[10 Ways that Satan Loves to Watch Marriages Fall Apart](#) · 16 hours ago



Meg

Hm... There are a lot of reasons to stop or continue having children. Yes, God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and fill the Earth. Dude... The Earth is full! LOL What if two people love each other...

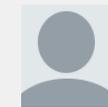
[15 Wisdom Principles on Deciding When to Stop Having Children](#) · 3 days ago



Brenda

More than a decade ago, the church I attended sent all their ministry leaders to a NANC 2-day workshop to better prepare us to serve those under us in ministry. I attended, and was shocked by some...

[Have You Been Burned By A NANC Counselor?](#) · 4 days ago



Yulon Huddleston

I have been married to a man for two and a half years to some one I have known for about 20 years. He always feels as if any thing I say or do I'm disrespecting him. Rather

The mentor works to reiterate the same biblical truths that the instructor is giving out each week in class. This worked to help ingrain truth in Bill's mind, and when specific situations came up where Bill was tempted to surrender to his sinful desires, his mentor could apply the truths they learned that week in tangible situations. Having biblical counsel available in the moment kept up Bill's momentum towards change.

In their helpful book *How People Change*, Tim Lane and Paul Tripp speak of change as a "community project." Team counseling involves more people in giving the same counsel and helping to share the same load. By involving more people, we found that the unity of voices was convicting and challenging to Bill. We also found that when one person couldn't drop everything and run to help Bill in an immediate situation, one of the other two members could help. Individual counseling would not have been able to bear the whole load of Bill's needs. Involving other counselors meant no single person had to carry the whole burden by themselves, and Bill had more hands ready to help him bear his burdens ([Galatians 6:2](#)).

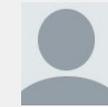
Small Groups

Finally, as Bill made some progress, we began to involve his small group. Confessing to his small group was a particular difficulty. He had sinned against his family and friends in very serious ways, and admitting that publically was hard. It meant exposing failure and exposing scars. It meant some level of embarrassment for all involved. But confessing to them revealed that Bill was truly more interested in change than in keeping his own reputation. His small group added more accountability and encouragement to Bill's life.

Bill's small group leader began to work directly with Bill's counselors to continue ongoing discipleship. His small group leader began to spend time with Bill in weekly activities that had less to do with his addiction recovery. This meant that Bill was experiencing discipleship beyond his problems. Too great a focus on his problems would have meant that Bill only ever talked about drugs and alcohol, or that he only ever talked about his faith in relation to drugs and alcohol. His small group leader was able to help him look beyond his problems and see the greater Christian life before him. Bill needed this outlet to see the depth and beauty of a holistic Christian

it's giving a suggestion...

[10 Ways that Satan Loves to Watch Marriages Fall Apart](#) · 5 days ago



fee

This is nonsensical, I

appreciate aspects of it and

each point is a proactive step any addict needs to incorporate into his life. But you do any points you have a disservice by discounting the...

[5 Mindsets of "Addictive" Thinking](#) · 6 days ago

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life.

Recently, Bill was finally able to share his story with the whole church. We celebrated with him as he gave testimony to God's grace, and particularly God's grace through the counseling and support of the whole church. If addiction has a strong social component to it, then the church of all places should be able to help people find hope and healing. People can change, but they can't change on their own. Thank God for the church.

Join the Conversation

How are you incorporating the Body of Christ into the essence of your biblical counseling ministry?

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Mark E. Shaw · 5 months ago

Dave, thanks for the thoughtful article. My calling in life is to reclaim the care of 1 local church because a rehab program does not offer a community that lasts like is that most biblical counselors do not TOUCH an addiction situation for a variety not so much. We need the local church to step up with our uncommon community addicts which is why I write, speak, teach, and go everywhere I can to promote church solution! Thanks again for your blog post.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

pastor_dave619 → Mark E. Shaw · 5 months ago

Mark, your work has been a tremendous help to me and a guide in the future for you for the encouragement and for all you do.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Lavonne Wafford · 2 months ago

Many think that rehab treatment is completely scientific and via prescription drugs rehab at [an alcohol addiction program in calgary](#), where I used to live. The model is completely different- they use yoga, counselling, prescription drugs and prayer. I would have never recovered over my addiction if it wasn't for my lord.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Patrick G Hogan · 5 months ago

Very good, especially in the observation that someone is restored in a holistic context 'fixing' the problem as perceived by whomever. Being willing to do things this way within the church body. The natural tendency is either to maintain the almost brutal single focus on the soul/body/spirit's health. or to lapse into inattention and forgetfulness. The first is often a strategic purpose with a planned endpoint. All of which poses questions such as: do you discipline the body itself to handle ministry this way (and this can apply to all struggles) do you achieve constancy and continuity in these aspects of ministry or soul care over .. then the struggling person may be told that it was their job to keep the core significant point, to be sure, but often a cop-out by everyone else.) Frankly, it's

you for coffee.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

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